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Seattle, Wash.
(Cir. D. 207,553 - Sat. 192,256
S. 245,834)

MAY 3 1960

Space Ships May Bring Back Lethal Microbe

BY JOHN W. FINNEY

WASHINGTON, May 2.— The Space Science Board of the National Academy of Sciences cautioned today that returning space ships may bring back microbes of other planets which will become "pervasive nuisances" on earth.

Once on earth, the board said, the microorganisms could proliferate rapidly and pose a danger to agriculture, and perhaps to people.

THE BOARD URGED, therefore, as a matter of "cautionary wisdom," that great care be taken in establishing direct contact with other planets and that a "stringent embargo" be placed against the premature return of samples from other planets.

The warning was contained in a report entitled, "The Biological Sciences and Space Research," prepared for the board by Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel Prize winner and head of the Department of Genetics at the Stanford University School of Medicine, and Dr. H. Keffer Hartline of the Rockefeller Institute. The report is one in a series being made by the board to outline the new frontiers to be explored in space research.

THE REPORT EMPHASIZED that the exploration of the other planets, including the search for some forms of life, can be "expected to give us new insights into the origin and evolution of the physical universe and of the chemical phenomena that constitute life."

There are also "significant opportunities" for biologic research within the present space capability of orbiting satellites, it said, such as in studying the physical and psychological effects of weightlessness, verifying the biological effects of radiation and determining the biological rhythms in an environment disconnected from the rotation of the earth.

Ultimately, however, it said, biological research in space should aim at the exploration for life on other planets and the moon, first with unmanned instruments and later by retrieval of samples from the planets.

WHILE THE RETRIEVAL of planetary samples "would ultimately be the most informative means for the advancement of planetary science," the report pointed out that such missions "also introduce the risk of back-contamination" of the earth by extra-terrestial microorganisms.

This risk, the report said, "cannot be decisively evaluated within the framework of our present knowledge of planetary biology." But it pointed out that the matter is of "particular concern" because of "the unique capability of living organisms, especially microorganisms, to proliferate rapidly and occupy new habitats."

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PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU
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PORTLAND
Seattle
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The Oregonian
Portland, Oregon
(Cir. D. 242,211 - S. 306,168)

MAY 5 - 1960

Space TeeVee Next

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A microscope-television setup planted on another planet by rocket is the most promising proposal for studying life outside the earth without contaminating it, a Nobel prize scientist says.

Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a geneticist at Stanford University, said biological research in space will throw new light on evolution theories and the controversial question of the nature of the first living molecule.